



# Patriarchal Princesses and Wicked Witches

A Feminist Reading of the Depiction of Women in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

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Patriarkala prinsessor och ondskefulla häxor

En feministisk läsning av kvinnoporträtten i Arthur Millers *The Crucible*

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## Abstract

Based on the Salem witch trials of 1692-1693, Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* treats a historical event that could be considered overflowing with patriarchal oppression. Despite the author's clear disapproval of the historical cruelty, the play continuously reveals patriarchal structures and shows misogynist tendencies in its depiction of women. This essay suggests that the two main female characters Abigail Williams and Elizabeth Proctor function as representations of binary oppositions based on the patriarchal assumption of two categories of women: the 'bad girl' and the 'good girl,' which both reinforce the idea of women as unnuanced objects rather than multifaceted subjects. By arguing that Abigail and Elizabeth represent the binary pairs 'selfish/sacrificing' and 'promiscuous/frigid,' the essay finds that the two women are depicted as 'either/or' and that the unnuanced portrayals result in an unsympathetic reading of them. Finally, the essay concludes that regardless if the woman is a 'good girl' or a 'bad girl,' she is socially punished or given unflattering characteristics in order not to compete with the male protagonist in terms of reader sympathy.

## Sammanfattning

Arthur Millers pjäs *The Crucible* skildrar häxprocesserna i Salem 1692-1693, en historisk händelse som kan anses vara genomsyrad av patriarkalt förtryck. Trots författarens uttalade förakt gentemot häxprocessernas grymhet finns det tydliga och återkommande patriarkala strukturer i den stundom misogynna pjäsen, särskilt i dess kvinnoporträtt. Denna uppsats visar hur de två kvinnliga huvudkaraktärerna Abigail Williams och Elizabeth Proctor fungerar som representationer av binära motsatser baserade på den patriarkala idén om två kategorier av kvinnor: den 'dåliga flickan' och den 'duktiga flickan', vilka förstärker synen på kvinnor som onyanserade objekt snarare än mångfacetterade subjekt. Genom att argumentera för hur Abigail och Elizabeth representerar de binära paren 'självisk/självpoffrande' och 'promiskuös/frigid' finner denna uppsats att Abigail och Elizabeth är porträtterade som

'antingen/eller' och att den onyanserade karaktäriseringen resulterar i en osympatisk läsning av dem. Slutligen påvisar uppsatsen att oavsett om kvinnan är en 'duktig flicka' eller en 'dålig flicka' blir hon socialt bestraffad eller försedd med osmickrande karaktärsdrag i syfte att inte konkurrera med den manliga protagonisten om läsarens sympati.

Never put your faith in a Prince. When you require a miracle, trust in a Witch.

— Catherynne M. Valente (134)

Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* from 1953 is teeming with witches: some constructed by contemporary witchcraft hysteria in the city of Salem, Massachusetts, while others are created by patriarchal structures reinforced by the play. There are women accused of witchcraft by their neighbours, but there are also women depicted as wicked, selfish and malevolent witches by the author himself. The play is based on the Salem witch trials of 1692-1693 and shows the fatal consequences of jealous whispers among citizens leading to misinterpretations, forced testimonies and finally the death of innocent people. In this essay, the play is treated as a text intended for reading, rather than as a script for on-stage performance where dimensions such as character interpretations must be considered in a critical study of the play. In the preface to the play, Miller provides a comment on the historical event, but despite the author's clear disapproval of the witch trials described by him as "one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history," the play continuously reinforces the very ideas Miller claims to reject (Miller 2). I argue that the play has a patriarchal agenda that reinforces stereotypical portrayals of women as either 'good girls' or 'bad girls,' where the dichotomous depiction perpetuates the idea of women as unnuanced objects rather than multifaceted subjects.

Easily overshadowed by the obvious moral conflict of the witchcraft hysteria are the disturbing portrayals of the two main female characters Abigail Williams and Elizabeth Proctor. Wendy Schissel writes that despite "forty years of criticism very little has been said about the ways in which *The Crucible* reinforces stereotypes of *femme fatales* and cold and unforgiving wives in order to assert the apparently universal virtues" (461). Instead of problematising the unnuanced portrayals of women and reinforcement of stereotypical female characters, focus has been on the purification and moral righteousness of the protagonist John

Proctor. As an example of how previous focus has been on the male protagonist, Neil Carson states that “as the title suggests, the central action of *The Crucible* is comparable to the purification of a substance by heat. John Proctor undergoes a metaphorical calcination in the course of which he is reduced to his essential, purified self” (37). As an alternative to this androcentric reading of the play, the present text provides a female perspective. This essay follows Schissel in questioning the praise of the male protagonist and instead redeems the accused ‘witches’ Abigail and Elizabeth from the unjust treatment in the hands of Miller. Besides being a play that reinforces the idea of male superiority and female inferiority, dichotomic relationships are also recognisable in the depiction of women in the play. This essay identifies and studies binary oppositions based on the patriarchal concept of ‘good girl’ and ‘bad girl’ from a feminist perspective, and shows how these binary pairs operate in favour of one category of women while despising the other.

To better follow the discussion of how the two female characters function as representations of binary oppositions in the play, a plot summary, a note on the style of narration and finally a definition of the binary oppositions in a feminist context are needed. The play is set in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692 and consists of four acts, in which the plot is chronologically narrated. The play is opened with Reverend Parris crying at the bedside of his seemingly bewitched daughter Betty. Soon, the audience learns that Betty, Abigail and a group of other girls have been caught dancing naked and conjuring spirits in the forest. Being fully aware of the punishment for witchcraft and in order to escape punishment, the girls instead accuse other women of being witches, which escalates into trials where the girls act as jury. It is soon revealed that Abigail Williams, the antagonist of the play, is the driving force behind the ritual, which is an attempt to curse Elizabeth Proctor: the wife of John Proctor with whom Abigail has had an affair. In an attempt to take Elizabeth’s place as John’s wife, Abigail accuses Elizabeth of witchcraft and with the evidence of a ‘voodoo’ doll, Elizabeth is

imprisoned.

John Proctor is one of few who sees through the hysteria and hypocrisy among the citizens of Salem, but he still ends up in a situation where he is accused of being aligned with the devil and must reveal his secret affair with Abigail to save his and Elizabeth's lives. Finally, Proctor is forced to choose between signing a false confession of witchcraft and hence lie in order to save his life or die keeping his pride. The play ends with Elizabeth's life being spared due to pregnancy, Abigail fleeing to Boston and becoming a prostitute and John dying the death of a moral martyr. The central conflict of the play is of course the witchcraft hysteria, which itself can be seen as an example of patriarchal oppression and an attempt of controlling women, but since this essay studies portrayals of female characters, this essay is mainly focusing on the affair involving Abigail, Proctor, and indirectly Elizabeth.

The play is written in present tense and uses a third person omniscient narrator who sporadically interrupts the narrative by giving complementary information about character background, feelings and provides character descriptions to the reader. Therefore, the overt narrator is directly affecting and guiding the reader by defining the characters and deciding who to sympathise with. For instance, Reverend Parris is described as a man that has "cut a villainous path, and there is very little good to be said for him," whereas the protagonist John Proctor is introduced as a man with "a sharp and biting way with hypocrites" (Miller 3, 20). Vera Nünning writes that the risk with overt narrators is that they often are considered "untrustworthy not because of their rendering of the facts but rather on account of their interpretations and evaluations" (12). In *The Crucible*, careful reading and feminist spectacles help to identify the subjective narration, which is easily overseen when reading the play for the first time. A noteworthy aspect regarding the narration is that despite the ability to access all characters' minds, the narrator mainly focuses on the male perspective. Being the clear-sighted protagonist, John Proctor's feelings, thoughts and motifs are continuously described,

whereas for example Abigail's potential motifs behind her actions remain unknown to the reader. Moreover, stage directions provide complementary information about how the lines should be performed, such as "*delighted*" or "*a little scared*" (Miller 36-37; emphasis in original). And when Abigail is described, the subjective comments are often reinforcing the picture of her as a 'bad girl.'<sup>1</sup>

Abigail and Elizabeth constantly operate as stereotypical female dichotomies based on the patriarchal binary opposition of 'bad girl'/'good girl' in the play, where women are either 'patriarchal princesses' conforming to their gender role or 'wicked witches' breaking the gender-specific expectations. Sarah Appleton Aguiar underlines that the division is based on the assumption that women are 'either/or,' which precludes all forms of subjectivity and nuances in a personality, but instead reinforces "a caricature rather than a fully functional and individualized persona" (8). The stereotypical 'good girl' is the woman who conforms to her patriarchal gender role. According to Jaime Hovey, being a 'good girl' means being "passive, nurturing, peaceful, domestic, emotional and content" (483). To understand the notion of the 'bad girl,' stereotypical characteristics of a patriarchal man benefit from a definition since they are related to those of a norm-breaking woman. The character traits of a patriarchal man are opposing those of a 'good girl' and include being "aggressive, intellectual, competitive, worldly, remote, and restless" (483). The dichotomic relationship between male and female characteristics is not coincidental, but it is based on the assumption of male superiority and female inferiority where "women stay home and men run the world" (483). Or in other words, according to Judith Roof et al., "if males are smart, women must be less smart. If males are strong, women are weak" (617). Similarly, the stereotypical 'bad girl' is the woman who does not conform to her patriarchal gender role but instead breaks it by not expressing traditional

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<sup>1</sup> These stage directions are only accessible when reading the play and therefore invisible to the audience when the play is performed.

female character traits. In line with Aguiar, “the malevolent female is one who usurps her role from the masculine domain” and, paradoxically, she is “then condemned for acting like a man, for displaying the very same traits a male hero might be lauded for possessing: assertiveness, command and leadership, an acquisitive nature, intellect, persistence, ambition, and self-preservation instincts” (7-8). Since the gender roles are a way of controlling women and assuring their inferiority in relation to men in the patriarchy, the ‘bad girl’ is often considered a threat to the power balance between men and women when acting like a man, for which she risks being socially punished.

By treating the concept of ‘bad girl’/‘good girl’ as a superordinate binary pair, several subordinate binary oppositions based on dichotomic female character traits are recognizable in the play. This essay concentrates on two such binary pairs: ‘selfish/self-sacrificing’ and ‘promiscuous/frigid,’ where the latter is extra focused. The choice to concentrate on these features is largely due to their significance in the patriarchal view on whether a woman is a ‘bad girl’ or a ‘good girl.’ Following Mary Caputi, the division of women in patriarchy is the “long-suffering angel versus evil temptress; all-loving, self-effacing mother versus self-centred, hedonistic seductress” (57). Therefore, the idea of being self-sacrificing as a woman and how it is related to motherhood and sexuality is relevant since they all operate in relation to each other and together compose a ‘bad girl’ or ‘good girl’ identity.

The first of the two binary pairs identified in the play is ‘selfish/self-sacrificing’, where Abigail represents the former and Elizabeth the latter. According to Roof et al., in patriarchy “femininity is linked with maternity and nurturing,” and a patriarchal woman, that is a ‘good girl,’ should therefore be self-sacrificing and caring (619). Since women are “expected to find their central fulfilment as mothers and wives,” patriarchal ‘good girls’ are expected to be content and have no personal interests but instead primarily care about the family (Roof et al. 620). Therefore, being a selfish woman in a patriarchy is unmaternal and



socially unaccepted as it implies that the woman exists primarily for herself rather than in relation to a man as wife, daughter or mother.

Completely opposing the assumption of the nurturing woman is Abigail Williams. She is depicted as selfish, limitless and immoral in her quest to become Mrs Proctor. She never hesitates to turn in a neighbour or accuse a friend of lying or witchcraft to get what she wants. Besides accusing Elizabeth of witchcraft, she claims that Tituba (Reverend Parris servant) as well as her own friend Mary Warren have been aligned with the devil and sent their spirits on her: Tituba “sends her spirit upon me in church; she makes me laugh at prayer,” and more subtly that “a wind, a cold wind, has come. *Her eyes fall on Mary Warren*” (Miller 44, 108; emphasis in original). Abigail even threatens to kill her friends if they tell the truth about conjuring spirits in the forest, saying that “let either of you breathe a word, or the edge of a word, about the other things, and I will come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you” (Miller 20). The displayed aggressiveness in Abigail is a traditional male character trait, but when occurring in a woman, it makes her unsympathetic. According to Heilbrun and Stimpson, “what tends to be considered aggressive and egocentric in a woman might as easily be considered a quest for liberty and self in a man” (62). In Abigail, traditionally masculine features such as ambition and competition are central, whereas the character traits of a ‘good girl’ are rare; she is neither nurturing and content nor passive. By creating a female character acting like a man, Abigail is considered unsympathetic by other characters in the play as well as by the reader. Instead, she becomes the antagonist who is not just turning people against each other, but also restrains Proctor in his moral journey by tempting him into adultery.

The reasons for Abigail’s behaviour are rarely mentioned in the play, although a potential motif might have made her character more sympathetic. According to Aguiar, the ‘bad girl’ characters must often “gain some sense of power within themselves or risk losing

their identity, their subjectivity, their psychological well-being, or even their lives” (98). Abigail’s actions might be due to fear of being burnt at the stake, where she perhaps feels forced to sell out her fellow citizens in order to save her own skin. The reader can only speculate about the potential causes for Abigail’s selfish actions since her perspective is rarely given. Only once does Miller hint at a potential reason. Following her threat to her friends, she says that “I saw Indians smash my dear parents’ heads on the pillow next to mine, and I have seen some reddish work done at night, and I can make you wish you had never seen the sun go down” (Miller 20). This monologue reveals the trauma of Abigail witnessing her parents being murdered, but is not further mentioned in the play. The possible reasons behind her merciless treatment of her friends and fellow citizens remains unknown, but having experienced brutality and hate towards her family earlier in life might result in her acting in a similar fashion to protect herself from tragedy. Regardless of her underlying motif, there are no stage directions or character descriptions that put Abigail in a favorable light, but instead she is depicted as a malevolent young woman with selfish interests.

Abigail’s selfishness and unsympathetic character is further reinforced by the fact that she neither has parents nor is a mother herself. According to Valentine M. Moghadam, in patriarchy “a woman fulfils her functions by being a wife and mother,” and by not belonging to a husband, Abigail fails to meet her gender expectations (500). To this can be added Leyla Önal’s observation that:

within a discourse which defines women only in their relation to men – as daughters, wives and mothers – the female evil simply connotes ‘other’ women, who escape this bind and thus, evade societal control mechanisms. [...] They are the antitheses of proper women, being condemned to be seen as evil and malevolent. (88)

Abigail's marital status therefore reinforces her 'bad girl' character; she does not belong to a husband and has no children to care for. She focuses entirely on herself and her 'selfish' motifs. Considering Abigail's age of seventeen, it would not be unlikely for her to have married already. After all, her friend Mary Warren at one occasion proclaims that "I am eighteen and a woman, however single," implying that not being married by the age of eighteen is rare (Miller 60). To make matters worse, Abigail attempts to break up a happy family by seducing the husband of another wife, which contributes to her role as the selfish antagonist. The function of creating two categories of women through Abigail and Elizabeth (being the self-sacrificing mother) and how they reinforce each other is further discussed below.

Besides not being married, Abigail is an orphan, which must be central since she is introduced by the narrator in the first scene of act one as "*a strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling*" (Miller 8-9; emphasis in original). The fact that she has no parents might feel misplaced between the note on her appearance and ability to deceive, but it is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, she does not belong to a family, and hence has no siblings, mother or father to love and take care of. Being unloved and alone makes it easier to depict her as unsympathetic. Secondly, she does not *belong* to another man; in patriarchy "the senior man has authority over everyone else in the family" (Moghadam 501). This line of reasoning implies that when a young girl is fatherless, she is less valuable. She belongs to no man and is therefore more likely to act inappropriately and even become a seductress or a prostitute, like Abigail.

The fate of Abigail would most likely be different if she had been married or had a patriarchal father figure who looked after her, but now, her role as the wicked seductress is sealed. By saying that "the legend has it that Abigail turned up later as a prostitute in Boston," Miller not only tries to undermine her importance but also to whitewash Proctor's behaviour

by implying that he was the victim of a seductress (Miller 146). According to Schissel, “Miller’s statement of Abigail’s fate resounds with implicit forgiveness for the man who is unwittingly tempted by a fatal female, a conniving witch” (465). The whitewashing is progressive because, as Simone de Beauvoir states, “the prostitute incarnates evil, shame, disease, damnation; she inspires fear and disgust; she belongs to no man, but yields herself to one and all” (225). Therefore, the final information about Abigail stresses her unimportance, makes her the selfish scapegoat and positions Proctor as the innocent victim.

On the other end of the binary pair ‘selfish/self-sacrificing,’ there is Elizabeth Proctor — wife of John Proctor — who embodies the role of the self-sacrificing mother. Elizabeth’s ‘good girl’ qualities are many: she is domestic, emotional, weak and passive. In the play, Elizabeth does not leave her home once before being imprisoned, and when she fails to keep their maid Mary Warren at home, Proctor “*holding back a full condemnation of her*” says that “it is a fault, it is a fault, Elizabeth – you’re the mistress here, not Mary Warren” whereupon Elizabeth answers that “she frightened all my strength away” (Miller 52; emphasis in original). Elizabeth is hence the perfect patriarchal wife and mother who does not challenge her husband, but quietly obeys him and reprimands herself for her, as well as his, faults.

Elizabeth is The Mother whose life revolves around the children and the husband. For instance, when she is being wrongly accused of witchcraft by Abigail and arrested in her home, her last words are to “tell the children I have gone to visit someone sick” (Miller 78). She never lets her own interests interfere with those of the family, which is the direct opposite of Abigail who never operates in favour of anyone but herself. Elizabeth’s heroic words about the children are, however, not valued as highly as Proctor’s later in the play. When Proctor is told by the court that his confession to witchcraft will be public, he says that “I have three children – how may I teach them to walk like men in the world, and I sold my friends?” (Miller 143). According to Schissel, the difference in sympathy is most likely because

“Elizabeth is expected to react in the maternal fashion that she does, but for John to respond thus is a sign of sensitive masculinity” (469). Therefore, the reader sympathises more with Proctor as his words contribute to his moral cleansing, later culminating in his martyr-like death.

Elizabeth’s most self-sacrificing act is, however, when she risks her own life by lying to protect her husband’s secret affair. She is depicted as righteous and, according to Proctor, “that woman will never lie” (Miller 92). When the jury hears her about Proctor’s affair, however, she is unaware that he has already confessed to adultery and gives a false testimony saying that she is uninformed of the affair (Miller 113). This act costs her freedom and the life of her husband. The fact that Elizabeth is being punished for telling one lie further reinforces the play’s patriarchal agenda. According to Schissel, “John has told several lies throughout the play, but it is Elizabeth’s lie that the critics (and Miller) settle upon, for once again the lie fits the stereotype – woman as liar, woman as schemer, woman as witch sealing the fate of man the would-be hero” (468). Following Schissel’s line of argument, the narrative of events suggests that despite being the righteous wife, even Elizabeth succumbs to her innate goal of condemning men, however unintentional. The play shows that despite being a patriarchal ‘good girl’ it is never good enough, but regardless of how moral, righteous and pious the woman is, she will be socially punished, one way or another.

Similar to the fate of Abigail, Elizabeth’s destiny benefits from a careful reading since the misogynist tendencies of the play are easily overseen. At first sight, Elizabeth’s life is spared and she escapes being burnt at the stake, which suggests that being a ‘good girl’ is rewarded in the play. However, Elizabeth’s life is only spared because of her pregnancy. As Reverend Hale says himself: “life, woman, life is God’s most precious gift; no principle, however glorious, may justify the taking of it” (Miller 132). But this act of mercy seems to apply to unborn babies rather than women, since sparing Elizabeth’s life was not important

before learning of her pregnancy. Once again, the primary function of women as mothers becomes apparent, and the inability to affirm women as valuable and independent individuals rather than mothers, wives or daughters of men reveals the patriarchal structures in the play. The unnuanced depiction of Elizabeth as a self-sacrificing 'good girl' and Abigail as a selfish 'bad girl' continues in a similar manner when studying how their sexuality is portrayed.

The second binary pair identified in the play concerns female sexuality and the concepts of promiscuity and frigidity. In patriarchal society, frigidity is considered the lesser of two evils as it aligns with the concept of the 'good girl.' But according to Schissel, both frigidity and promiscuity have negative connotations since they "test a man's body, endanger his spirit, and threaten his 'natural' dominance or needs" (464). Promiscuity and frigidity could be seen as two extremes of female sexuality, which both challenge the norm of female passivity in different ways. In the play, Elizabeth is depicted as the frigid wife whereas Abigail represents the promiscuous seductress who embodies the patriarchal stereotype of the young, beautiful woman driven by lust who operates in a selfish manner. Despite being a minor and implied virgin, which is further analysed below, Abigail is portrayed as a seductress. She pesters Proctor and attempts to tempt him into adultery by saying that "I have a sense for heat, John, and yours has drawn me to my window, and I have seen you looking up, burning in your loneliness" and "I know how you clutched my back behind your house and sweated like a stallion whenever I come near!" (Miller 22-23). Her seductive personality is further reinforced by Proctor's reluctance to indulge in Abigail's flirtation by saying that "We never touched" and "I never give you hope to wait for me," making Abigail the untiring 'bad girl' and Proctor the righteous and faithful husband (Miller 22-23). As mentioned above, the tone for the depiction of Abigail is set already in the first scene of act one, where she is introduced by the narrator as "*a strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling*" (Miller 8-9; emphasis in original). The presentation is brief but manages to

include central character traits of the female antagonist.

Beauvoir claims that in patriarchy, only women who are considered conventionally beautiful are worthy of attention (319). Since Abigail plays the part of the seductress of the protagonist John Proctor, her appearance must be beneficial in order to be a trustworthy seductress. According to Beauvoir, a woman “knows that when she is looked at she is not considered apart from her appearance: she is judged, respected, desired, by and through her toilette” (693). In the play, Abigail is depicted as highly aware of the social benefits her beauty brings. What makes Abigail an object of contempt is, however, that she plays the part of the *active* seductress rather than, in line with Beauvoir, the traditionally passive object waiting to be caressed (727). Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément state that a patriarchal woman should be “beautiful, but passive; hence desirable” (66), and the fact that Abigail is active in her sexual desire makes her a ‘bad girl.’ She breaks her expected gender role, for which she is socially punished.

That Abigail is continuously mentioned as a seductress and a whore throughout the play, despite her implied virginity before meeting Proctor reveals the play’s patriarchal agenda since it suggests that her seductress personality is innate. For instance, John Proctor proclaims “how do you call Heaven! Whore! Whore!” when losing his temper in court (Miller 109). Instead of criticising her unchristian behaviour, he uses slut-shaming and brings up her sexuality in an offensive way which is completely unrelated in the context and shows misogynist tendencies. To suggest that Abigail is a prostitute is a way of diminishing her power and undermining her statement in court. As Demirkaya argues, Proctor uses “the power of language only to stigmatise her, but he himself escapes it” (128). His patriarchal mind fails to recognize his own participation in the adultery, but instead he blames Abigail for his inability to remain faithful to his wife and hence tries to make himself the victim of the inherently bad seductress.

Following Schissel it is, however, noteworthy that despite being marked as a malicious child and promiscuous young woman by characters in the play, Abigail lacks sexual experience and is most likely a virgin before encountering Proctor (463). In act one, Abigail in tears states that “I look for John Proctor that took me from my sleep and put knowledge in my heart!”, implying that Proctor was her first sexual encounter (Miller 24). Therefore, the suggestion that Abigail, despite growing up with a Puritan minister, was the active part in her affair with Proctor strengthens the play’s patriarchal agenda. The depiction shows that “Abigail’s sexual knowledge must be inherent in her gender” and that “the condemnation of Abigail as an all too common example of blaming the victim” (Schissel 463). Following Schissel, the play implies that Abigail’s seductress personality is innate and that women in general and ‘bad girls’ in particular are driven by selfish, erotic motifs, even though they lack sexual experience themselves. Furthermore, when Abigail says that Proctor “took me from my sleep and put knowledge in my heart,” it suggests that her feelings for Proctor are deeper than merely sexual, that he woke her from her emotional sleep and put the knowledge of love in her heart (Miller 24). The implied seriousness behind her speech is strengthened by the fact that this line is not commented on by the narrator with more than “*in tears*” (Miller 24, emphasis in original). Usually, Abigail’s lines are described and commented in a way that reinforces her ‘bad girl’ character such as “*tauntingly*” and “*with a bitter anger*” (Miller 22-23; emphases in original). In this quote, however, the lack of malicious or sarcastic undertones implies that she speaks from her heart. Despite the potential motif of love rather than vengeance or hate behind her actions in the play, Abigail is continuously dismissed as a child, witch or a whore in order to belittle her or dismiss her as insignificant.

The expression ‘taking her from her sleep’ is also disturbing as it suggests that Abigail was unenlightened and in need of a man to wake her. This trope is common in fairy tales such as *Sleeping Beauty* and implies that the passive damsel in distress is lifeless until awoken, and



thereby conquered, by a man (Beauvoir 215-16). The trope reinforces the patriarchal norm that a 'good girl' is passive, but when Abigail is using it to convince Proctor and the reader of her passivity, the effect is the opposite since she is depicted as the active part of the affair. Regardless if Abigail claims to be a 'good girl,' her 'bad girl' character is continuously reinforced in the play, which results in an unsympathetic reading of her.

The scapegoating of Abigail as a promiscuous seductress rather than a victim is further reinforced by the lack of favouring comments from the overt narrator and stage directions. Besides being introduced as having "*an endless capacity for dissembling,*" Abigail is depicted only through descriptions by other characters and stage directions, which means that her motifs and reasons behind her actions remain unknown to the reader (Miller 8-9; emphasis in original). When the reader is kept unaware of her motifs, it is easier to depict Abigail as the villain and sympathise with Proctor, whose feelings and thoughts are continuously shown. For example, Proctor is given the opportunity to clear his conscience in court and win the reader's heart by admitting to the adultery: "on the last night of joy, some eight months past. She used to serve me in my house, sir. *He has to clamp his jaw to keep from weeping*" (Miller 110; emphasis in original). It is noteworthy that the stage directions work in favour of Proctor, who is not just following his tale of woe by calling out that "a man may think that God sleeps, but God sees everything," but also manages to make himself a victim by pleading that the judges shall see that it Abigail's accusations are a "whore's vengeance" (Miller 110). On the contrary, Abigail is never given the opportunity to tell her side of the story, which implies that the male perspective is superior to the female.

Miller has even altered the ages of the protagonist and the antagonist to reinforce the idea of Abigail as a seductive beauty and Proctor as an innocent victim. According to Jenny MacBain, the historical Abigail was merely eleven years old during the Salem witch trials, whereas John Proctor was sixty (5, 22). In *The Crucible*, however, Abigail's age is increased

to seventeen and John Proctor's is decreased to thirty-five. Of these two modifications, only Abigail's age is commented on in "A Note on the Historical Accuracy of This Play" by Miller saying that "Abigail's age has been raised" (Miller 2). From a feminist perspective it is tempting to reflect upon the potential intention of these choices. According to Beauvoir, young girls in patriarchy are supposed to be pure and innocent, rather than desirable (347). Since an eleven-year-old girl could not possibly be held responsible for the moral fall of a grown man, her age was increased to make her role as a seductress more credible. This, seemingly small, adjustment is another sign of misogynist tendencies in the play as it implies that women, as soon as they reach puberty, become sinful seductresses. If considering the fact that there is an age difference in the historical document of nearly fifty years, it becomes highly problematic to assume that Abigail would have been responsible for the seduction of John Proctor. Rather, it implies that Proctor sexualises young girls and then places the blame on the victim. In line with Carson, "Proctor was not only twice the age of the girl he seduced, but as her employer he was breaking a double trust" (46). The potential consciousness behind the choice of leaving out the age modification of Proctor suggests it would be simply impossible to justify Abigail as the initiator of the affair with regard to the age difference. Mentioning Proctor's age reduction would most likely discredit him as the victim, which would contradict the idea of men as innocent victims of female desire. If Miller's intention with the play in fact was to display the awfulness of the historical event, keeping the age difference would certainly have strengthened his agenda. As a result, the justification of the affair despite the age difference of a generation instead opens up for questioning Miller's intention with the play. However, the purpose of this essay is not to explore a potential author intention, but rather to analyse how women are depicted in the play, which are two separate topics.

So far, the depiction of the promiscuous Abigail has been analysed. Elizabeth

represents the other end of the binary: the frigid wife. Elizabeth represents the pious, married woman with no outspoken sexuality and embodies the patriarchal ‘good girl’ in several ways. However, in order not to compete with Proctor in terms of reader sympathy, Elizabeth is presented as cold and frigid, the stereotypical traits of an old wife. According to Amy Nolan, frigidity is an undesirable female trait in patriarchy since it “connotes such strongly negative qualities – coldness, death, stiffness, lifelessness” (589). In the play, Elizabeth’s coldness and frigidity is central to her character, which is implied already in her first line when she suspiciously asks Proctor “what keeps you so late? It’s almost dark” (Miller 49). Shortly after, he kisses her, she “*receives it*” and “*with a certain disappointment, he returns to the table*” (Miller 50). The latter quote suggests that there is distance between the spouses, which later in the scene is revealed as the consequence of Proctor’s affair with Abigail (Miller 54). Her implied coldness and frigidity is depicted partly through her own lines and stage directions but not least by other characters. Abigail establishes Elizabeth as “a cold, sniveling woman” who “is telling lies about me!” already in act one (Miller 23-24). After this judgement, the blaming continues similarly and even Proctor “*laughing bitterly*” claims that “Oh, Elizabeth, your justice would freeze beer” (Miller 55; emphasis in original).

It might be considered contradictive to criticise the depiction of Elizabeth as a cold wife since her treatment of Proctor is justified, but there are several severe consequences of this stereotypical portrayal. The depiction draws on and reinforces the stereotype of the older, desexualised woman’s jealousy of the attractive young woman. In the play, Elizabeth’s appearance is never commented on, which could be compared to the importance of portraying Abigail as a “*strikingly beautiful girl*” (Miller 8; emphasis in original). The lack of focus on Elizabeth’s appearance could be interpreted as her being the older woman who has lost her attractiveness. Because older women in patriarchy are considered erotically outdated, the younger woman reminds the older of passed times and opportunities that, according to

Beauvoir, the older woman now is “being unable to obtain [...] for herself” (536). The same principle of being erotically expired goes for the patriarchal mother, as “the very use man makes of woman destroys her most precious powers: weighed down by maternities, she loses her erotic attraction” (Beauvoir 192). And as Önal explains “motherhood becomes the sole – asexual – site of female activity, which, on the one hand represents the fulfilment of the female desire, and on the other hand defines this site as separate or even *purified from* female sexual activity” (87; my emphasis). Since Elizabeth represents the mother as well as the older woman, she is doubly desexualised.

According to Cheri Register, the concept of women despising and viewing each other as competition regarding male attention is a patriarchal idea as well, being a phenomenon feeding on self-hatred among women as a consequence of the “belief in female inferiority” (21). In the play, the jealousy between Abigail and Elizabeth reveals misogynist tendencies in the female characters as well. Similar to the characterisation of Elizabeth through Abigail’s descriptions of her as a “cold, sniveling woman,” Elizabeth is quick to proclaim Abigail a whore and the guilty party rather than blaming her husband for the affair (Miller 24, 62). Instead of berating her husband, Elizabeth claims that she “never thought you but a good man, John – *with a smile* – only somewhat bewildered” and hence forgives him more easily (Miller 55; emphasis in original). The name-calling among the women in the play suggests that it comes easier to blame women for actions carried out as much by men, which shows that the misogyny is internalised in the women of the play.

The stereotypical depiction of Elizabeth as the cold and frigid wife is also problematic as it contributes to the experience of her as an unsympathetic character due to her unforgiving nature. Because the play is set after the affair, Elizabeth is portrayed as unable to forgive John and move on. Rather than showing Proctor as an adulterer, Elizabeth is made the black sheep for holding grudges, for instance by criticising Proctor’s inability to act on the accusations

against Elizabeth (Miller 54). Proctor fails to take responsibility for his actions, repeatedly making himself the victim and placing the guilt on the woman, in this case Elizabeth:

Spare me! You forget nothin' and forgive nothin'. Learn charity, woman. I have gone tiptoe in this house all seven month since she is gone. I have not moved from here to there without I think to please you, and still an everlasting funeral marches round your heart. I cannot speak but I am doubted, every moment judged for lies, as though I come into a court when I come into this house! (Miller 54-55)

According to Schissel, the quote shows that “when his conscience cannot be calmed, when he quakes at doing what he knows must be done in revealing Abigail’s deceit, it is upon Elizabeth that he turns his wrath” (466). Once again, the play manages to transfer the guilt of the affair from the male perpetrator to the female victim and get away with it. The play continuously tries to depict the male protagonist as a man who wears his heart on his sleeve and who, despite showing self-perception and regret about his actions, is the innocent victim of unforgiving or seductive women who become scapegoats for Proctor’s behaviour.

The most disturbing side of depicting Elizabeth as the cold and frigid wife is, however, that she confirms these qualities herself and blames herself for Proctor’s infidelity. Besides constantly criticising herself when forgetting chores such as fetching cider and “*reprimanding herself for having forgot,*” in line with the patriarchal self-hatred among women, she accuses herself for being the reason behind Proctor’s affair (Miller 51; emphasis in original). In act four, she confesses that “it needs a cold wife to prompt lechery” and that “I counted myself so plain, so poorly made, no honest love could come to me! Suspicion kissed you when I did; I never knew how I should say my love. It were a cold house I kept!” (Miller 137). By using a style of narration similar to the phenomenon of ‘repeating a lie until it becomes the truth,’ all characters as well as readers are inclined to perceive Elizabeth as a cold and unforgiving wife.

In a way, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the repeated name-calling finally results in Elizabeth viewing herself in the same manner and even acts accordingly. She is depicted as a traditional 'good' patriarchal woman who is not only self-sacrificing but someone who also takes the blame to ensure domestic peace by diminishing her own ability to be loved.

Critics such as Carson has often overlooked the problem of Elizabeth taking the blame for Proctor's mistake, and instead considers him "a rational man in a universe gone mad" (37). In a society characterised by witchcraft hysteria, Proctor is depicted as the sane man that sees through the pretence and hypocrisy, claiming that "they're pretending" in court when Abigail and the other girls appear possessed by the devil (Miller 108). Because Proctor is sensible in the matter of revealing the fraud of witchcraft, his ethos is strengthened, and the reader easily considers him sharp and trustworthy in all matters. Consequently, since these topics are subordinate to the current religious crisis of their society, he gets away with his misogynist tendencies, victim blaming and violence against women. The topic of jealousy that the women indulge in seems petty in comparison to the "overwhelming nobility of John's Christ-like martyrdom," which results in an experience of the female characters as less sympathetic (Schissel 464).

The temporal setting reinforces the one-sided depiction of the two female characters and the effect of their dichotomic relationship. Since the play is set *after* the affair between Proctor and Abigail, it is easier to sympathise with the man and condemn the woman. If the play was set during the infidelity, the sympathy for Proctor would most likely be negatively affected, and the women would instead be considered victims rather than scapegoats. Because the play is set after the extramarital affair, there is no information about Proctor's actions before or during the affair, but he is depicted as reluctant towards Abigail and unwilling to indulge in her physical and verbal invitations. Instead, Proctor is portrayed as the righteous man who persists temptation, whereas Abigail is depicted as the needy and dependent

mistress although she is perhaps aware that her only way of social survival after being with a man is to marry him. Once again though, Abigail's side of the story is never shown. As Tanfer Emin Tunc writes, "Proctor emerges as the hero: despite his previous marital infidelities or 'sins,' he honorably rejects Abigail and is led to the gallows for refusing to confess to, and incriminate others of, witchcraft" (269). Regardless of Proctor's treatment of women, he dies a hero because saving the city from hypocrisy is more important than treating women fairly. The temporal setting also reinforces Elizabeth as the unforgiving wife holding grudges towards her husband and is easily considered bitter in contrast to Proctor's attempts for forgiveness. By portraying Proctor as regretful, Elizabeth is the cold one, although her actions and feelings could be considered both human and just. The contrasting relationship where one part strengthens the other is similarly used between Abigail and Elizabeth where the two characters reinforce each other as 'bad girl' and 'good girl.' By creating two antitheses, the selfish seductress seems even more egoistic and promiscuous in comparison to the self-sacrificing prude who instead becomes even more selfless and frigid.

To conclude, the play reinforces the patriarchal idea of two unnuanced categories of women where Elizabeth embodies the 'good girl' by conforming to her traditional gender role, whereas Abigail represents the 'bad girl' by breaking it and instead behaving like a man. The one-sided depiction of Abigail as ruthless and sexually active without any kind of subjectivity or nuance results in her being socially punished by the characters in the play, as well as by Miller and the reader. Since Elizabeth is conforming to her place as a patriarchal woman, she is presumed to be praised. However, in order not to challenge John Proctor in his place as the hero, she is given unflattering characteristics such as coldness and frigidity and is punished and thrown in jail for being too self-sacrificing and, after all, telling one lie costing the life of her husband. The irreproachable man is continuously portrayed as the innocent victim of the desire and wrongdoings of women, rather than vice versa. Hence, the narrative

of events suggests that women are being socially punished regardless if they conform or oppose their gender role, which shows the patriarchal agenda of the play, and the setting together with stage directions and the overt narrator contributes to reader sympathy in favour of the men rather than the women.

The depiction of Elizabeth as self-sacrificing and frigid and Abigail as selfish and promiscuous is not problematic as such. The problem is rather that the unnuanced characterisation of women as either one thing or another reinforces the stereotype of women as one-sided objects rather than multifaceted subjects. Instead of creating full and dynamic characters, Elizabeth and Abigail are predictable and colourless which weakens not only the portrayals of women but the credibility of the play as a whole. The portrayals support the idea of male superiority and female inferiority by creating sympathetic male characters but unsympathetic women restraining the protagonist's moral journey. Regardless of Miller's intentions, the patriarchal mechanisms behind "one of the [...] most awful chapters in human history" are continuously reinforced throughout the play in its depiction of women as 'either/or' (Miller 2). Once again, history repeats itself in trusting a man as the hero while the woman is being burnt at the stake, regardless of whether she is a patriarchal princess or a wicked witch.



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